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TWO VIEWS CONCERNING ABILITY GROUPING.

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IN TWO SEPARATE ARTICLES, TWO VIEWS OF ABILITY GROUPING ARE DISCUSSED. THE FIRST MAINTAINS THAT FOR ECONOMIC REASONS TAX-SUPPORTED EDUCATION MUST GROUP STUDENTS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL PURPOSES, WHICH MAY BE DONE ACCORDING TO ABILITY OR TO AGE. ABILITY GROUPING IS DEFENSIBLE AS AN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE WHEN IT IS BASED ON MEASURABLE ACHIEVEMENT. ALL CHILDREN, EXCEPT THE VERY LIMITED, SHOULD RECEIVE INSTRUCTION IN THE BASIC INTELLECTUAL DISCIPLINES IN BOTH ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL, BUT STUDENTS ASSIGNED TO SLOWER GROUPS SHOULD BE INSTRUCTED AT A DIFFERENT PACE. GROUPING, THEREFORE, CAN BE USED TO FURTHER THE PROGRESS OF STUDENTS OF DIFFERING ABILITIES ALONG A UNIFORM CURRICULUM. THE SECOND ARTICLE, ON THE OTHER HAND, ARGUES THAT ANY GROUPING OF STUDENTS IS DETRIMENTAL TO EDUCATION, ESPECIALLY TO THE EDUCATION OF THE POOR. MOREOVER, ABILITY GROUPING IS FELT TO BE SEGREGATIVE BY DEFINITION. THE ALTERNATIVE OFFERED IS THAT OF UNGROUPED CLASSROOMS, WITH EMPHASIS ON INDIVIDUAL INSTRUCTION AND SUPPORTIVE ASSISTANCE. THESE ARTICLES WERE PUBLISHED IN "SOUTHERN EDUCATION REPORT," VOLUME 2, NUMBER 5, DECEMBER 1966. (DK)

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Two Views Concerning Ability Grouping

How best to group students in elementary and secondary schools is a question that sharply divides educators. Some say students should be grouped on the basis of age, without regard to differing abilities. Others say that groups should be formed according to some measure of individual abilities.

The U.S. Office of Education study, Equality of Educational Opportunity, completed last summer, found that for the nation as a whole, about 38 per cent of all elementary-school pupils and 75 per cent of all secondary-school pupils are in schools that practice some form of grouping or tracking. Ability grouping covers a broad range of practices. One example is the track system which provides different courses of instruction for different students on the basis of their rated abilities. The Board of Education of Washington, D. C., recently decided to modify the track system in junior and senior high school, apparently because board members regarded the system as too rigid a method of grouping. Other forms of ability grouping include special classes for gifted children and for slow learners. Many of the current programs for education of children from disadvantaged backgrounds provide for some form of ability grouping.

Southern Education Report asked two educational leaders with divergent views on ability grouping to summarize their positions. The editors hope that the statements of George Weber, associate director of the Council for Basic Education, and Arthur Pearl, professor of education at the University of Oregon, will provoke letters from readers. Letters received will be published to the extent that space permits.

VIEW 1:

WHY IS THE IDEA EVEN QUESTIONED?

By George Weber

George Weber is associate director of the Council for Basic Education, Washington, D. C., a position he has held since 1963. Formerly an economist, he regards himself as essentially an informed layman with respect to the public schools. His job calls for extensive contacts with parents, public-school teachers and administrators, and education writers and thinkers throughout the country. He is the author of How One Citizens' Group Helped Improve the Public Schools: the East Greenbush Story *(Council for Basic Education, 1964). A native of Cincinnati, he holds B.A. and M.A. degrees in economics from the University of Cincinnati, where he later taught economics. He also taught economics at Princeton University and served as an economist with the Central Intelligence Agency. He was foreign affairs analyst for the National Security Council from 1952 to 1961.*

It seems strange to me that the idea of ability grouping should be open to question. I say this because of the very nature of formal education: the conscious and organized effort to take a person from his present level of achievement towards a higher level of achievement in skill, knowledge and understanding. Most people would agree that, ideally, this would involve a one-to-one ratio, a teacher and a pupil, *a la* Mark Hopkins. Under these conditions, the teacher could tailor his material, his method and his pace to the pupil's needs and progress.

For economic reasons, tax-supported education has to settle for instruction in groups of various sizes: traditionally 20 to 35, but in some circumstances 50, 100, even 10 or 5. In a very few instances, because of unusually difficult educational problems, the one-to-one ratio is allowed: children with physical handicaps and unusual speech problems, and the retarded come to mind. But as general practice this is economically out of the question, and some kind of grouping is necessary. The question, then, is not whether we should have grouping, but on what basis.

In other words, those who oppose ability grouping do not oppose grouping of all kinds, because they cannot do so within the practical economic limitations of tax-supported education. What they advocate, when they talk about heterogeneous grouping, is grouping by age without regard to any other factor. The matter thus boils down to whether we are going to group by ability or age. I am not advocating, and I assume that Professor Pearl would not, grouping by sex, race, or social class.

Before going any further, perhaps I should define "ability grouping." In the first place, I do not like the term because of its vagueness and ambiguity, both inherently and as a matter of use. In practice the term is almost always used in one of two general ways. Sometimes it is used to indicate grouping on the basis of *potential*, or rather, of *presumed potential*. At other times it is used to indicate grouping on the basis of *achievement*.

Ability grouping can better be defended when the term is used in the achievement sense. Potential is very difficult to estimate. The IQ and other general ability tests that we have involve a considerable range of error. Certainly, too, cultural factors enter heavily into the matter. More important, I feel, is the implication of determinism or permanance that adheres to IQ and similar tests. But the conclusive argument in favor of the achievement approach is that it corresponds (as presumed potential often does not) exactly to the ideal educational situation outlined above. The achievement measure says nothing about a child's potential, but merely attempts to measure where he is so that he can go on from there.

One of the arguments sometimes heard against ▶

ability grouping is that it is not "culture-fair" or "culture-free." Indeed it is not, and when the grouping is by assumed potential, the labeling of a student as of inferior potential (or of superior potential, for that matter) may well be unfair as well as unwise. But when the grouping is done by achievement, the fact that the tests used are not "culture-free" is desirable rather than undesirable. What is aimed at is cultural achievement, using that term broadly. Those who are "culturally disadvantaged" are just that, and there is every reason to recognize the fact. As it was once put waggishly, what would you think of Harvard if it were culture-free?

To make any discussion of this matter of grouping meaningful, we should discuss what the grouping is *for*, as well as *how* it is done. That is, once students are grouped, by whatever method, what are we going to *do* with them? Here, I believe strongly, is the crux of the matter. The Council for Basic Education stands for offering *all* children, excepting only those few whose intellectual equipment is clearly too limited (perhaps 15 per cent), instruction in the basic intellectual disciplines (English, mathematics, science, history, geography, foreign languages, art, and music) —in both elementary and secondary school. Grouping should serve to further the progress of students along this general and uniform curriculum, *not* to distribute them into entirely different educational programs. Students assigned to slower groups should be instructed in the same subjects, even though their instruction will have to be at different paces and levels of sophistication.

Ability grouping of one type or another, for one reason or another, is extremely common in American schools today.

Let us take a few examples. At the high-school level, the less advanced students should study foreign languages and mathematics, but should not be expected to achieve as much, either quantitatively or qualitatively, as the more advanced students. All students should study American history, rather than assigning the lower levels to some sort of social studies mishmash. In first grade, grouping has too often meant that the "bluebirds" were not exposed to instruction in reading at all on the basis that they were not "ready," while the "swallows" got a normal exposure. Miraculously, at the end of the first grade the assignment decisions were justified by the results: the "bluebirds" did not learn to read, while the "swallows" made more or less normal progress. The much preferable course is to expose both groups to reading, being prepared to go somewhat slower with the less advanced group.

Reading, of course, is a very interesting case because of the nature of the subject. Fundamental to almost all learning in the modern world, a certain skill in reading must be achieved before other subjects can be studied at anything but an extremely rudimentary level. Partly because of an unwillingness by many schools to face this fact squarely, millions of children have been promoted (under a system of grouping by age) from one grade to another with almost no achievement in reading. Many of these pupils

get to seventh or even ninth grade before their reading deficiencies are so obvious that they are finally assigned to remedial-reading classes (a kind of grouping). To avoid this, many schools are now placing greater and more conscious emphasis on reading achievement in the primary grades, devoting more time to instructing the children who learn this skill more slowly. Some schools which do not group children at the primary level for other subjects have found it wise to do so for reading.

Ability grouping of one type or another, for one reason or another, is extremely common in American schools today. It is the usual practice in high schools, where normally some sort of tracking or programming, together with grouping within courses, is practiced. Tracking involves grouping, but not all grouping involves tracking. In tracking, different complete programs are provided for different ability or achievement groups. This may mean, for example, that students in the lowest high-school track will not be able to take foreign languages or certain science courses at all. Such rigid classification of students is undesirable. More defensible is the less formal programming that has been used in large American high schools for many decades. Typically there are college-preparatory, general, commercial and industrial programs, although they might be called by different names. Under this system all students should take a core of basic subjects, with college prep students taking certain advanced courses that few of the other students take, and the commercial and industrial students some vocational courses as part of a terminal program.

Provided that this system is flexibly administered and the vocational courses postponed as long as possible, there is a certain justification for it. By the time students get to the ninth grade, there is a considerable range of achievement, as a result of a number of factors. To treat them all alike would be unfair. But too many students are guided by counselors into too much vocational work, much of which is obsolete. It should be remembered that currently about 71 per cent of young people are graduating from high school and about 38 per cent are entering college. About half of the students who enter college fail to finish a four-year program, mostly for academic reasons. Then, too, many a high-school student decides, in his junior or senior year, to try to enter college, only to find that his high-school program has precluded that choice.

Turning to Negro students in the South, grouping in the upper grades and in high school is a very important help in desegregation. Most of these children have had extremely poor education in segregated schools, and tossing them at random into previously all-white schools is about on a par with throwing an infant into six feet of water. Where grouping is already in effect in previously all-white schools, the desegregated Negroes can be assigned to classes more nearly compatible with their achievement levels. Many such Negroes are actually achieving at three or five grade levels below their white contemporaries. That in most cases this is due to poor prior schooling should not lead us to overlook this undeniable and unpleasant fact.

Is it kinder and more efficient to put a Negro child whose English performance is at about sixth-grade level into an eleventh-grade English class which is performing at grade level, or into a group of eleventh-graders which is performing at about eighth-grade level?

Of course ability grouping has its pitfalls. Lower groups can be regarded as dumping grounds which involve little or no educational purpose. Attitudes towards and names for lower groups can be cruel. Inadequate transfer provisions can result in a child's being "typed" for his educational life at the age of five or six. But many of these errors can be, and are, committed with heterogeneous (i.e., age) grouping. If ability grouping is done in the achievement sense, there are few valid arguments against it, and these arguments relate to poor implementation rather than to the concept itself. Many new programs (e.g., Head Start, Job Corps, ungraded schools, Upward Bound, Title I, and advanced placement) are based on the achievement grouping approach. Over the years there has been much talk in educational circles about "individual differences." There *are* such differences, and it is foolish either to deny them or to ignore them.

For Another View . . .

VIEW 2:
GROUPING HURTS THE POOR

By Arthur Pearl

Arthur Pearl has been professor of education in the University of Oregon's School of Education since mid-1965. He holds bachelor's, master's and doctor's degrees in psychology from the University of California at Berkeley. He is a native of New York City. Pearl has held faculty appointments at Howard University, the School of Public Affairs of the State University of New York, the School of Social Work of New York University and Los Angeles State College. Before assuming his present position, he was associate director in charge of research, Center for Youth and Community Studies, Howard University. He has also held research positions with the New York State Division for Youth, the California Governor's Special Study Commission on Narcotics, the Narcotic Treatment Control Program of the California State Department of Corrections and the Alcoholism Rehabilitation Division of the California Department of Public Health.

He is the author of a number of works, the most recent of which is "New Careers for the Poor," written in collaboration with Frank Riessman.

One of the many controversies in education today has to do with the grouping of students. There is a tendency in almost all schools to group students either formally or informally by their assessed ability to perform in the classroom; yet there is no body of evidence currently available either to support or effectively challenge this procedure. There is, at best, only educated opinion.

I find myself allied with those opposed to grouping, but grouping students according to ability is only one small, negative feature in an inadequate educational system. The question is not whether grouping can be justified but, rather, what to do with heterogeneous classrooms. Even in the relatively restricted perspective of ability grouping there are two sub-issues which need to be resolved. The first of these is the selection criteria used to assign persons to groups, and the second is what happens to children in grouped and ungrouped classrooms.

There can be no question that selection of persons for groups is based in part on background factors. Youth from disadvantaged backgrounds are much more likely to be placed in low-ability classes than are youth from advantaged backgrounds. Negro youth are much more likely to be placed in low-ability groups than are white youth. Elias Blake, in an article on the track system in Washington, D. C., published in *Integrated Education,* April-May, 1965, noted that in a high school where the students' median family income was in excess of $10,000 not even a fraction of a per cent of the students were in the basic track, while more than 92 per cent were in the college-bound or honors tracks. In a school where the parents had a median income of less than $4,000, Blake reported, no students were in the honor track, 15 per cent were in a college preparatory track and 85 per cent were assigned to non-college-bound programs. It hardly need be stated that in the former school the great majority of the students are white while the latter school draws from an almost exclusively Negro population.

There are some—an unfortunately sizable number of persons — who are not disturbed at the correlation between race or social class and assignment to low-ability or high-ability groups. They argue that the poor, and particularly the Negro poor, are indeed likely to be intellectually inferior and thus belong in classes with others having similar incapacities. This arrangement is desirable, they argue, because the inclusion of low-ability youth in classes with more able youth would impede the academic development of the more gifted, and the inclusion of youth unable to compete intellectually with others more able would lead quickly to their disenchantment with the educational process and attendant maladjustments to the classroom.

That the classification system used to make grouping determinations may be completely invalid does not seem to trouble the advocates of ability grouping. IQ tests and classroom performance are the primary indices used for assignment to high- and low-ability groups. At the present time it is impossible to make a legitimate case that these procedures are either "culture-fair" or "culture-free."

The IQ testing situation, the language used in the test (and the instructions) and the classroom situation are all alien to certain populations. Until these conditions are corrected, ability grouping will rob the

poor of a decent education, because there can be no argument on one point: children assigned to high-ability groups learn more than children assigned to low-ability groups.

Grouping takes many forms. The track system is one of the most rigid systems used. For example, the four-track system of Washington, D. C., provides distinctly different academic offerings to youth. Two of the tracks are college preparatory (the honor and the regular). The general track has a primarily vocational-business flavor and the basic track provides the least able youth with a bare modicum of literacy. Once assigned to a track it is virtually impossible for the student to transfer out. One study there found that 93 per cent of high-school students and 97 per cent of junior-high students remained in the track to which they were originally assigned.

The non-graded school is another way in which children can be grouped by ability. Here children are clustered, regardless of age, by their level of functioning. There is wide-scale support for this idea but enthusiasts seem to play down the importance of some integration at a later date. I have a queasy feeling that all segregation by ability leads to inferior educational status and the likelihood of disqualification for college matriculation.

Educators have an all too cavalier attitude about the relationship of educational experience to future life enjoyment. In a society which insists upon attainment of credentials for entrance into the largest and most economically and socially rewarding occupations, an assignment to an ability group, hastily and invalidly made, may alter the life earnings of the student by as much as a quarter of a million dollars, affect every aspect of his existence, and even intrude into the lives of his descendants.

Some people believe that those who oppose ability grouping think the schools should stress social and emotional development rather than academic learning. I would argue that academic learning depends upon social and emotional well-being. Subject matter will be learned only by those persons who obtain gratification from the learning experience. It is absolutely impossible for a child to learn if he, his peers and his teachers believe he cannot, and thus cease to encourage his efforts. That one study found no worse "self-concept, aspiration, interest, attitudes toward school and other non-intellectual factors" in ability-grouped classrooms than in heterogeneous ones comes as no surprise to me.

It is just as easy for schools to destroy children's self-respect in non-grouped classes as in ability-grouped classes. In both instances low-achieving students are told that they are stupid.

There are three important ways in which a student can attain self-esteem in school: from successful achievement in matters that the school deems important, i.e., academic performance; from a sense of contribution to a broader universe; and from belonging to socially desired groups, such as the "brains," the "athletes" and the "soc's." That students may ▶

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create new groupings which are alien to the school ("fringies," "hodads," "surfers," etc.) reflects a desperate effort on their part to find something to belong to after they have been exiled from the accepted and established school identities. Only those students who contribute to the prestige of the school or become involved in socially useful projects can ever attain this kind of fulfillment. Ability grouping militates against these kinds of gratification.

Segregating youths into groups of allegedly similar ability is not only restricting the social intercourse of these students but is also encouraging the formation of hostile, antischool groupings since second-class citizenship in the schools is the only offered alternative. Low-ability groups are further handicapped since the only kind of contribution which they are allowed to make is in non-academic activity and such contributions tend to undermine intellectual performance. It is possible, both in theory and practice, to design heterogeneous classrooms which do not incorporate these negative features.

At the heart of academic failure is poor teaching. Schools of education are not developing teacher competence. Little that a teacher receives in the university prepares him for the challenges offered by reluctant learners. As a consequence, the classroom is too often a dreary place, hardly inspiring the most dedicated students and unbearably dull to the unmotivated. While, perhaps, teachers could do better if they pitched their efforts to select audiences, it is also true that they could make a much more general appeal. A teacher must be taught to "sell" a subject. A teacher who fairly breathes enthusiasm for the topic he teaches and for his students will find that many of the "uneducable" are, in actuality, eager to learn.

The argument that grouping is essential to tailor the school program to the needs and learning style of the individual student falls apart when confronted with the progress in educational technology. Diversified academic fare can be offered to the most heterogeneous group through the use of programmed learning, teaching machines, controlled readers, etc. Individual interest can be stimulated without the need for segregation into groups. Basic Systems, Inc., has demonstrated that students varying in measured intelligence by as much as 50 IQ points can attain similarly high achievements in such challenging courses as chemistry. The lower-ability student takes a little more time to accomplish the goal but it has been my experience that so-called low-ability students have too much, not too little, time on their hands.

Today's school is a lonely place. The "each man for himself" philosophy which predominates in educational programming adds a dimension of unnecessary isolation to the classroom. Individual competition is not the only way to motivate youngsters. In athletics, youth eagerly participate in team play, and similar elan is to be found in classrooms which stress team learning. The more capable help the less capable, although in practice it is also found that often allegedly poor students offer much to those considered to be more gifted. Low-ability students find it possible to attain a sense of mastery over subject material. They find that the gulf between them and the "good" student is not as great as they had imagined.

Team learning facilitates positive identification with the school. The student sees himself sharing in intellectual experiences and he derives the gratification which comes with a feeling of belonging and solace that the group gives when things get rough.

Some might argue that social support of students is "mollycoddling" and that individual competition is the hallmark of American enterprise and success. It should be noted that American success was not solely due to individual competition. It was not "every wagon for itself" going west. Co-operation is even more essential today since we live in an even more interdependent society.

Ungrouped classrooms will require that some students be given special attention. Teachers do not presently have time to provide all the help necessary for every individual. Additional support can be obtained from nonprofessional teaching assistance. The nonprofessional can attend those students who are falling behind or he may conduct the class while the teacher gives aid to the individual. The nonprofessional can be used for homework help and other supportive services. Through the strategic use of teacher aides and assistants it is possible to maintain a brisk pace in the classroom and still not lose contact with the stragglers. Almost everyone in the classroom can attain a minimal expertise (and its concomitant feeling of confidence) without impeding the more advanced students.

Ability grouping, by definition, is segregative. Despite legislation designed to ameliorate the situation, segregation by race increases. Negro slums spread like uncontrolled malignancies in every major city in the country. In addition to segregation by race, there is intensification of exclusion by economic level and social deviation.

The school adds to, and is affected by, the segregation problem. Ability grouping, highly correlated with race, income, and deviance, prepares students for different stations in life, thereby assuring a continuation of segregated housing patterns and social stratification. The school, by limiting social contact of persons of diverse backgrounds, blunts their understanding and their sensitivities and thus contributes to the incidence of ugly racial outbursts. One cannot forget for one instant that those who are warring in the streets of Chicago and Grenada are the products of our educational system.

Most of what is done by schools ostensibly to help the situation only worsens it. Special classrooms, remedial education programs and compensatory education programs only increase segregation, and thus it is not surprising that these programs meet with minimal success. Ungrouped classrooms are not *the* answer to segregation but are prerequisite to an education which would allow every student to attain the academic accomplishments for first-class citizenship. ○